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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000556

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TAGS: PREL MARR PHUM ASEC CASC FJ

SUBJECT: FIJI UPDATE 12/13: RFMF MONITORING TRANSPORT TO PREVENT QARASE RETURN; INTERIM GOVERNMENT PLANS STALLED; EMINENT PERSONS AND TRADITIONAL WARRIORS ON THE MARCH?

REF: SUVA 554

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

11. (C) PM Qarase says Fiji is sliding into dictatorship, and he continues to state he leads the only legitimate government. He reiterated today that he intends to return to Suva as soon as he can find transport. The RFMF said it is monitoring all transport so as to keep Qarase in the outer islands of Lau. Qarase has denied corruption and challenged the RFMF to offer proof to the police. Bainimarama's announced intention to establish an interim government has not visibly moved forward. Supposedly he sees a need to have the Great Council of Chiefs re-instate President Iloilo first. A newspaper reports that traditional warriors have threatened to kill Bainimarama and burn the homes of RFMF soldiers if democracy is not restored by Christmas day. The RFMF says it can counter any threat. The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) wants to re-start an "eminent persons group" (EPG) mediation effort in Fiji next week. End summary.

Bainimarama a Saddam? Qarase discusses plans

12. (U) PM Qarase, still at his home in Lau, has told the media that Fiji is sliding into a dictatorship. Qarase has proposed that Commodore Bainimarama belongs in the company of Saddam Hussein, Idi Amin, and Hitler. Per reftel, Bainimarama suggested yesterday that Qarase plans to set up a "de facto" government in Fiji's West. Qarase said that is "an absolute lie," and added that he already leads the one legal government in Fiji. Qarase said he plans to "come into Suva very publicly," via Nausori airport, where he believes a large group of supporters will greet him. He suggested, rightly, that the RFMF will be concerned about that. The Army has announced its intent to keep Qarase from departing his island home. Qarase said he expects to be detained when he reaches Suva; but, he added, "That doesn't worry me. The crucial thing is the people of Fiji want to restore democracy."

Back and forth on corruption

13. Qarase responded today to Bainimarama's claims of government corruption, which he called "wild allegations." Qarase noted that every country suffers from corruption to some degree, and, he suggested, if the Army has evidence, it should provide it to the police so they can investigate. Qarase added his view that "there is a lot of corruption within the military" here.

RFMF interim government and GCC

14. (C) RFMF PM Senilagakali told the media today that he expects to stay in the job only until the end of December, presuming Bainimarama will have organized an interim government by then, blessed by President Iloilo, whom the RFMF expects will by then have been re-installed by the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC). It is not obvious to us why the GCC would feel the need to re-install President Iloilo, since the GCC and Iloilo believe Bainimarama never had the power to remove the President in the first place. It is also possible that the GCC might consider naming a new, more vigorous President. Presumably Bainimarama is hoping to claim some modicum of legal legitimacy out of the whole process, but it strikes us that any unbiased court would never buy the argument.

Nepotism arises

15. (U) Commodore Bainimarama announced to the media late this afternoon that he is appointing his brother, Meli Bainimarama, who is the new CEO for Fijian Affairs, to be acting head of the Fijian Affairs Board (FAB). The FAB head schedules meetings for the GCC. There have been suggestions that the GCC has been dragging its feet on scheduling the meeting Commodore Bainimarama wants for re-appointing President Iloilo. We will see if a sibling can change that.

A traditional threat to Bainimarama?

16. (U) A front-page headline in today's Fiji Sun newspaper reads: "Plot to Kill Commander." The article reports that

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traditional warriors from Fiji's 14 provinces have warned Bainimarama that he will face the wrath of the people if he does not return democratic rule by Christmas day. The warriors also have supposedly warned that they will burn the homes of all RFMF soldiers who remain loyal to Bainimarama. And they supposedly are also threatening ethnic Indians who have supported the military takeover. The Sun reports the RFMF has launched Operation Tuvakarau to investigate the threats and protect the Commodore. Land Forces Commander Driti reportedly has challenged the warriors to come forward and "stop playing mind games," since the RFMF is ready for anything. Driti claimed, "Never before has the military been united. The bond between soldiers is at one of its best."

PIF EPG - another attempt

17. (C) The Australian High Commission informs us that the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) is attempting to arrange for an eminent persons group (EPG) to visit Fiji in an attempt to mediate an end to the crisis. A meeting of PIF ministers authorized an EPG on Dec. 1, just before the coup. Some consideration was given to having another PIF ministerial meeting to update the mandate, but a decision has been made to proceed directly to a modified EPG attempt. EPG members are likely to be the same as before, except for NZ FM Peters, who is about to undergo knee surgery. His replacement on the team is a Samoa minister, who will be joined by Australian former CDF Cosgrove and Vanuatu DPM Kilman. The initial POC within the Fiji Government will be MFA CEO Mataitoga, and the timing is intended to be next week. An unknown is whether the key Fiji players, in particular Bainimarama, will be receptive.

Comment

18. (C) If Qarase can find transport to Suva, the enthusiasm of his supporter turn-out will provide a good measure of his continuing popularity and his chances of somehow overturning the coup in the near-term. The Fiji Sun report of a traditional-warrior warning, if even partly true, would be a concrete sign of the ethnic-Fijian backlash many here presume

is slowly boiling toward the surface.
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